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SUBJECT: YEMENI SPEAKER OF PARLIAMENT'S INTERVIEW WITH
AL-HAYAT

Classified By: Ambassador Edmund J. Hull, for Reasons 1.5 (b,d)

11. (U) Begin summary: A recent interview with Speaker of Parliament Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar provides an illustrative example typifying the views of this prominent Yemeni political figure. Al-Ahmar is known for his controversial ideas as demonstrated in a June 20 interview with London-based daily Al-Hayat in which he criticized the Arab response to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the situation in Iraq, condemned the Sharm-al-Sheikh and Aqaba summits and described the domestic political scene from his vantage point as leader of Yemen's second largest party. See biographic note in paragraph 8. End summary.

Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

12. (U) In a 6/20 interview with the London-based daily Al-Hayat, Yemeni Speaker of Parliament Sheikh al-Ahmar denounced "Arab pressures on the Palestinian groups to stop the legitimate resistance against the Zionist occupation" and criticized the Roadmap. He explained that Arab opposition to the Palestinian issue is the result of "defeat, internal fear, and the inability to say no to the occupation and Zionist terrorism." Sheikh al-Ahmar condemned the Sharm-al-Sheikh and Aqaba summits because "they turned the resistance, martyrdom, and the jihad against Zionism into terrorism." He asked "what dignity and value is left for the Arabs if they abandon the legitimacy of the Palestinian resistance? How can they confront Israel with all its military capabilities and American support without the resistance?" Al-Ahmar surmised that "martyrdom and the jihad card is the only thing left to confront Israel. The Arabs should defend all the Palestinian factions in order to continue the free and legitimate resistance."

Iraq

13. (U) Sheikh al-Ahmar blamed Arab states for the situation in Iraq saying that "had it not been for the green light from some Arab and Muslim states, the U.S wouldn't have invaded and occupied Iraq." Al-Ahmar believes "Arab states are responsible for what is happening (in Iraq) after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime under the pretext of the existence of weapons of mass destruction. The Americans have no excuse anymore for slaughtering and annihilating the Iraqi people and destroying the country. It is impermissible to remain silent over the massacres, violation of honor, desecration of land and holy site that is taking place now in Iraq."

Domestic Issues

14. (U) Discussing domestic issues for the first since the April 27 parliamentary elections, al-Ahmar said that Yemen's political situation is "better than that of the other Arab countries despite the cracks and violation." Commenting on President Saleh's recent decision to pardon 16 former ROYG officials living in exile, he declared that "President Saleh is known for his leniency and his care for all the sons of Yemen." Al-Ahmar denied that he ever objected to or voiced any reservations about the pardon, saying that he has always supported "closing the pages of the past" for Yemen's interest and stability. Sheikh al-Ahmar said that during the campaign for the April 27 parliamentary elections "the Islah alliance with the YSP and other opposition parties...under the umbrella of the Joint Meeting Parties was a natural phenomenon." However, he admitted that he was not one of those who supported this experiment.

15. (U) Al-Ahmar disclosed a tension between GPC and Islah "due to the violations, extortion, and pressure by the ruling party against Islah during the elections," but stressed that "this tension does not pose a danger to security and stability in Yemen." He described it as a temporary disagreement that coincided with the elections and will not turn into ongoing confrontations. Continuing, he added that had it not been for the Islah leadership's flexible and

patient policy the elections could have been a catastrophe. Had the election been fair, which al-Ahmar asserted it was not, he believes Islah would have won twice as many seats. He added that YSP was expected to win the largest number of seats, but "the GPC worked to turn everything in its favor."

16. (U) In the aftermath of the 4/27 elections, al-Ahmar said that although Prime Minister Ba Jammal's government was granted confidence by the majority of the ruling party MPs, there were those who questioned the new program, but "were afraid of being held accountable later if they blocked the vote of confidence." Returning to the ROYG line, al-Ahmar re-affirmed his condemnation of all acts of terrorism and expressed his support for President Saleh's policies in combating terrorism and promoting security and stability in Yemen.

Comment and Bio Note

17. (C) Begin comment: The 70-year old Yemeni Speaker of Parliament is also the foremost sheikh of the Hashid tribe and chairman of Islah (an Islamist-oriented reform party and the second largest political party in Yemen). His status as tribal leader, business leader and Speaker of Parliament allows al-Ahmar a prominent platform. Sheikh al-Ahmar is well-known for his anti-U.S. rhetoric and, more recently, his opposition to the inclusion of female candidates in the 4/27 parliamentary elections. For him, the tribe and its authority are above everything else. His comments to Al-Hayat are consistent with his conservative ideals, represent a broad spectrum of thought in Yemen and illustrate areas of continued tension between his followers and more moderate elements in Yemen. End comment.

18. (U) Begin bio note: Sheikh al-Ahmar was born in the Amran governorate in 1933. He was active in the national struggle against Imamite rule and was imprisoned in 1959 by the late Imam Ahmed. (Imam Ahmed also executed al-Ahmar's father and brother.) Al-Ahmar was released from prison after the 1962 revolution against the Imam, and led the Hashid tribes in defense of the revolution and the republic. He was appointed as a member of the Presidential Council, formed after the 1962 revolution, and was Minister of Interior in three consecutive cabinets. In 1969, al-Ahmar was elected Chairman of the National Council that was tasked with drafting the constitution, and in 1972 he was elected Chairman of the Shura Council. After unification and the declaration of political pluralism, al-Ahmar called for the formation of the Islah party. Al-Ahmar became the first Speaker of Parliament in 1993, and was re-elected in 1997, 2000 and 2003. Four of his sons are members of the newly elected parliament: two are Islahis, while the other two represent GPC (the ruling party). End bio note.

HULL